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REASONING GUIDES: FOSTERING READING IN CONTENT AREAS

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There is little doubt that a student stands a good chance of comprehending difficult content area material when actual life experiences can be related to an author's intent. The importance of a reader's prior knowledge and experiences in the meaningful reception, integration, and retention of new concepts is a widely held precept in learning theory (Ausubel, 1968; Smith, 1978).

Teachers can foster this essential blend of reader experiences and author intent by employing strategies that build readiness for reading content material. One such pre-teaching strategy, the structured overview, has been outlined in some detail by Vacca (1977). The present article describes another approach to fostering readiness in the content areas, involving the use of teacher-constructed reasoning guides.

Reasoning Guides

Reasoning guides as defined by Herber (1978) contain broad, applied level statements aimed at stimulating the reader's thinking during reading and after the completion of a selection. Used before the reading of a selection as a preparatory aid, a reasoning guide can effectively mobilize a student's prior experiences and existing belief system concerning a topic. On a post-reading completion of the reasoning guide, student responses may well be in marked contrast to initial responses, reflecting the degree to which the reader perceives the author's intent.

The following example illustrates the way in which a reasoning guide can be used as a preparatory aid to comprehending a poem by Richard Brautigan (1970, p. 114), and as a springboard for follow-up discussion.

Directions: Before reading the poem, check those statements that you would agree with. Then, after reading the poem, check the statements you think the poet would agree with. Be prepared to give reasons to support your choice.

You Poet

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| — | — | 1. Technology frees us to enjoy the wonders of nature. |
| — | — | 2. Life in the city is crazy—
life in the country is the way to go. |
| — | — | 3. The advantages of technological growth far outweigh disadvantages. |
| — | — | 4. There is already abundant evidence that computers will someday control our lives. |

ALL WATCHED OVER BY MACHINES OF
LOVING GRACE

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

Richard Brautigan

(Excerpted from the book The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster by Richard Brautigan. Copyright 1968. Reprinted by permission of DEACORTE PRESS/SEYMOUR LAWRENCE)

Follow-up Discussion

Although students complete the reasoning guide individually, a key to its success as an aide to comprehension resides in follow-up discussion (Herber, 1978). Students in pairs and small groups compare responses and collaborate in the comprehension process, thereby extending the bounds of intrapersonal reading. Since reasoning guides are written at the applied level of comprehension, students feel free to risk defending a guide statement according to their own experiences. Unlike literal, convergent pre-reading questions, applied level statements require the reader to engage in divergent thinking with little chance of failure. At the post-reading discussion stage, the presentation of a convincing counter-argument by a fellow student may cause one to alter his/her initial point of view.

Developing a Pre-reading Reasoning Guide

1. Identify the author's intent, realizing, particularly with literary works, that a range of interpretations may be possible.
2. Decide what reader experiences are important for understanding the author's intent. What allusions does the author make? Are there similes --metaphors--conceits?
3. Create statements, some of which are supportive of your interpretation of the work and some that are antithetical. These statements can be straightforward or deceptively attractive, but they should allude to common knowledge or common value systems of your students which the author treats in an uncommon way.
4. Arrange the statements on a sheet of paper with two columns for pre- and post-reading reactions as in the poem example.

Other Print and Non-print Applications

Reasoning guides can be created to aid comprehension in a variety of content area learning situations. They can be designed to help explicate important ideas in a content area text or to enhance student learning from films, field-trips, and/or guest speakers. Herber (1978) provides a wide range of specific examples of reasoning guides encompassing most subject areas.

As with any teaching strategy, reasoning guides can be overused and abused. Employed judiciously in combination with follow-up discussion, reasoning guides provide a vehicle that acknowledges and capitalizes on a student's real-life experiences with a topic before and after reading about it in content material.

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